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ABSTRACT

The use of case studies as a means for teaching business French is discussed. The approach is advocated because of the realism of case studies, which are based on actual occurrences. Characteristics of a good case are noted: it tells a story, focuses on interest-arousing issues, is set in the past 10 years, permits empathy with the main characters, requires appraisal of decisions already made, and requires a search for solutions to management problems. Cases should be concisely written (2-3 pages) and apply in one of these areas: marketing; advertising; management; import-export; intercultural communication; and finances. In the case introduction, sufficient background information should be given to allow students to identify with the situation and people involved. The case method is then contrasted with the traditional method of business language instruction, its advantages outlined, and classroom adaptations for the method suggested. The place of the case study in both the business course and the language course is addressed briefly. Finally, a case concerning a gourmet grocery store is presented and a number of linguistic, role-playing, and cultural exercises are suggested. (MSE)

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Teaching Business French Through Case Studies: Presentation of a Marketing Case

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1. What is a case? : Definition

A case describes an actual, real-life business/administrative situation commonly involving a decision or a problem. The situation has been actually faced by business executives. It is usually written from the viewpoint of the person making the decision. It allows the students to step figuratively into the shoes of the decision-maker or problem solver.

Charles I. Gragg defines a case as follows:

> A case typically is a record of a business issue which has actually been faced by business executives, together with surrounding facts, opinions, and prejudices upon which executives decisions have to depend. These real and particularized cases are presented to students for considered analysis, open discussion and final decision as to the type of action which should be taken (Teaching with Cases 10).

The basis of the case study method is that an actual person truly faced the situation described, even though the names of the executives and the companies involved may be altered. In our particular case, we gave to our delicatessen owners the fictious names of Sophie Goldman and Françoise Petit, their business was called "l'Epicerie Gourmande." Everything else - the women's educational background, the location, the type of commerce, the problems faced by the two young women - is true to a real-life business situation.

The type of case one would typically use in teaching a commercial French class involves problems and issues facing French executives in a French setting; e.g. launching a new perfume, using a scandalous publicity campaign to sell a line of clothes, managing an inheritance, offering a new kind of bank with exceptional services. On the other hand, another category of cases

presents comparative situations. An executive has to deal with cultural differences as he wants to work in a foreign country or penetrate a foreign market: a French executive is promoted to a management position in the United States without being fully aware of his new team's different approach to work and decision-making; or vice versa, an American comes to France and faces rejection and anger from his co-workers because he is unaware of the gallic corporate culture, its stress on formality and "grandes écoles" education; a French company tries to sell a product in Japan without having a good grasp of the new market requirements; French workers have to deal with the harsh realities of working for an American-owned fast-food company, etc. The goal is to place the students within economic situations in a French environment (with French laws, commercial rules and practices) as well as to make them aware of the role played by cross-cultural differences in business transactions.

As a whole, a good case tells a story, focuses on interest-arousing issues, is set in the past ten years, permits empathy with the main characters, requires appraisal of decisions already made and finding solutions to management problems.

The cases are usually short and to the point, two to three typed pages long. They fit into six main categories, but obviously the list is not exhaustive and it is up to the teacher to look for or create cases relevant to his particular class needs; we have focused on the major business areas: marketing, advertising, management, import-export, intercultural communication, and finances.

In the introduction to the case, sufficient background information should be given to allow the students to identify with the situation and the people involved. Information about

people may include educational background, personal characteristics (such as age, tastes, hobbies), aspirations and motivating factors. The situation should also be placed in its specific setting by providing a few noteworthy details (such as type of neighborhood, scenery, striking characteristics).

Because cases become outdated - situations evolve, economic policies and people's attitude change, government and top executives are replaced - they should be periodically updated to keep abreast of realities.

2. Case-study Method versus the Traditional Method

Most commercial French teachers use a traditional method of instruction. They have textbooks which include neatly-divided chapters describing "banks," "the Stock-Exchange," "insurance," or "goods and services." The reading are highly theoretical, sometimes removed from real-life situations, and even a bit dry. Detailed technical definitions or descriptions (e.g. of stocks and bonds, of oligopoly) as well as complex diagrams are included. These readings are followed by a series of exercises which not only test vocabulary and comprehension but often also grammatical accuracy. The professor will lecture on a specific topic, then he/she will ask questions and correct exercises with the students. He/she will have all the right answers which the students will write down faithfully. When examples or dialogues are added, they are usually fictional accounts of situations. They feel artificial, made-up and invented.

In the case-study method, the students are faced with specific actual business situations. Instead of giving a lecture, the professor will lead a discussion about these situations, and will

encourage the students to analyze and solve the problems arising from them. The book Teaching with Cases notes that:

> ... there are few truths or fixed rules that need to be learned in administration since managerial situations and circumstances are usually unique and constantly modified. Learning to deal with new situations is, therefore, more profitable. Consequently, the case method involves the clinical approach of learning by doing. The focus is on the development of analytical and decision-making skills rather than on the acquisition of knowledge in the form of management theories and techniques (17).

The cases which are presented in written and read aloud are studied and discussed in small groups, then given to the entire class for discussion directed by the professor. This teaching method entails that the students come prepared to class so that everybody makes a contribution. The students should have read the case carefully taking notes and, possibly, have done some additional background readings as assigned by the professor (in management theories and techniques relevant to the case).

A case-study textbook will include extensive vocabulary and comprehension exercises, but no grammatical review (which is already at the center of most other French classes and, therefore, should not be the primary focus of a commercial French course).

3. Advantages of the Case-study Method

. It is a practical class which serves as a rehearsal for life. Students are dealing with real-life situations. They are able to learn from experience without suffering great risks from their mistakes (as they would in the real world). Furthermore, students encounter multidimensional issues which some of them might have already faced in real life (if they have worked) or have heard of. Students will discover how cultural differences play out in the

business world.

. They receive immediate feedback from their instructor and their classmates.

. They develop decision-making skills. The case-study method forces students to think about a situation, and make a decision, even formulate a program of action.

. They learn the benefits of teamwork as students learn from each other. As many opinions are expressed, they realize that several solutions may be possible to deal with each problem.

. This is an active, rather than a passive method of learning. Students have to contribute. They learn by doing. "They are developing, in the classroom, a whole set of skills of speaking, debating, and resolving issues. they are also gaining a sense of self-confidence in themselves and in relating to their peers" (Teaching with Cases 19).

. It is a flexible class. One can always create or use new cases with a different focus. In fact, the number of cases is virtually limitless, and cases have to be renewed periodically as they become outdated.

. The cases are adaptable to the focus of the class. Some professors will choose to have more cross-cultural cases or marketing cases depending on the students' needs and interests.

. Students have to develop ideas and arguments in French while learning how to manage time since each of them will have a limited amount of time to expose his ideas.

4. Possible Changes for the Case-study Classroom

Students should sit in a circle or a semi-circle to encourage participation. The professor

should get to know the individual students as soon as possible as he/she should try to call on everybody and give everyone a chance to participate.

The professor needs to be dynamic, exciting and well-organized. He must keep the discussion orderly while encouraging students to express themselves. He should not be overly critical in order not to bog down the discussion. He should ask pertinent and pivotal questions to stimulate the discussion, and from time to time, summarize and organize the individual contributions. He should let the students do most of the talking but time and direct the discussion to keep it from wandering. In other words, he should be a constructive leader; in many ways, he should act like a conductor.

The professor should also be well-prepared as he should provide the appropriate background theoretical readings for each case.

5. The Place of Case Studies in a Commercial French Class

The case-study method can stand on its own in a class which is composed of students with a business background. It may also complement a more theoretical and technical class.

If one is dealing with a class made up of French majors for whom it is the first business course, the case-study method has to be complemented with a more theoretical textbook so that the students learn the basics of commerce and French business culture.

6. The Case "*Epicerie Gourmande*"

Summary:

Two former classmates, Sophie, who has a degree in literature, and Françoise, who has a degree in economics, meet several years after graduation and, as they are both unhappy with their current occupations, decide to open their own gourmet grocery in Montreuil. They stock the store with exotic foods not found in other grocery stores. L'Epicerie Gourmande is a veritable "Cave of Ali Baba," even the decor is exotic. However, in spite of the quality of the products and the ambiance in the store, at the end of two months of operations, Sophie and Françoise are on the brink of bankruptcy. The director of the Crédit Mutuel of Montreuil, who is a patron of the grocery, advises the entrepreneurs to seek the help of Armand de Broglie, who is the owner of the Agence-conseil of Broglie and a long-time friend of the banker. He will be able to advise Sophie and Françoise about their business strategies.

Including exercises, a case is usually ten to fifteen pages long and is followed by a vocabulary list, vocabulary exercises, as well as comprehension and communication questions. The case text itself is two to five pages long (Epicerie Gourmande is three pages long) with an additional one to two pages of summarized vocabulary (one page for this case). The vocabulary incorporates a list of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and idiomatic expressions with their translations. The case does not over-utilize technical vocabulary, thus remaining as realistic as possible. There are usually five to ten specific comprehensive questions (six in this example)

which can be used to ensure that the case has been read and understood. Vocabulary exercises are to be prepared in advance by the students and typically consist of true or false questions (ten items), fill in the blank sentences (three sets of ten sentences), matching items (two sets of ten words), and a translation exercise (four sentences from English to French). Communication exercises include both role playing and culture questions. Topics for discussion or composition may encompass open-ended questions to prepare the student for classroom debate (i.e.: "Quelles sont les étapes de la création d'entreprise en France?"). In "Jeux de Rôle" (role play), students assume the part of a character (i.e. store owner, client, banker, consultant, etc.) and must envision possible dialogues (i.e.: "Françoise et Sophie se rencontrent par hasard et se racontent leur parcours depuis le lycée."). Finally, the goal of cultural questions is to stimulate cross-cultural awareness (i.e.: "Quelles sont les différences entre la France et les Etats-Unis en ce qui concerne le commerce de détail?").

French students are required to dedicate a substantial amount of time to sufficiently familiarize themselves with case studies. They should be prepared to summarize the case, as one student will be chosen to do so in class.

In addition to knowing the case, students are responsible for the vocabulary and must prepare all vocabulary exercises outside of class. After the case summary, the professor may ask individual students to explain in French particular words from the case (i.e.: "marchandise = ce sont les produits vendus par l'Epicerie Gourmande"). Additionally, students may be requested to formulate complete sentences which utilize vocabulary words (i.e.: "marchandise

= Ce camion transporte des marchandises de Paris à Rome"). The professor may also elect to give a short vocabulary quiz as well as ask comprehensive questions to specific students (i.e.: "Décrivez les produits que l'on trouve dans l'Epicerie Gourmande"). Furthermore, roles playing can be used to check both vocabulary and comprehension. Through these methods it can be verified that students have adequately prepared the case.

The professor may prompt debate by posing an open-ended question (i.e.: "Comment les deux jeunes femmes peuvent-elles sauver leur commerce?"). Students then act as professional consultants: they must make and defend their decisions by presenting a thorough proposal. During the discussion, the professor should assume the role of a mediator and act to control, but not dominate, the conversation. Shy students should be encouraged to participate by soliciting their opinions, just as more outspoken students, who might otherwise monopolize the debate, should be moderated.

Cultural exercises may begin by introducing a question such as: "Est-il plus difficile d'ouvrir un commerce en France qu'aux Etats-Unis? Pourquoi?" The professor may need to remind students that conducting business in France may be different from common business practices in the United States. At this point, students can share their knowledge of France and, perhaps, of the French market. Additionally, the professor may opt to utilize the discussion to eliminate stereotypes by clarifying certain cultural traits. For example, due to the administrative "parcours du combattant," always criticized by students, most French retail stores maintain a higher level of stability than their American counterparts.

To recapitulate, students seem to enjoy this new method of teaching business language. Instead of passively listening to a lecture, students are involved in an interactive class discussion. Furthermore, as case studies are very flexible, professors can adapt them to the level of their students. The same case may be used as an introduction to business French or in an advanced business class taught in the language.